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ABSTRACT

Honors education is not immune from the current controversy concerning the role of the literary canon. Indeed, the problem seems especially crucial for honors programs, for their curriculums are often multi-disciplinary in their approaches to culture and history. The solution may lie in what Linda Hutcheon calls the "poetics of the postmodern." For Hutcheon, an essential strategy of the postmodern is that of the "double voicing" found in language itself--of installing and questioning, of enunciating and contextualizing. The double-voiced strategy can be used when discussing curriculum revision. This can be done by installing the canon using special texts which in turn question the canon. These texts are "historiographic metafiction," and incorporate literature, history, and theory of the postmodern domain. Through historiographic metafiction, all the assumed grounds of understanding are questioned. A three-semester sequence based on the tripartite division of history into Premodern, Modern, and Postmodern periods can accomplish the double-voiced honors curriculum. The first two semesters would be devoted to the installation of the canon. The third semester would then question the canon by using historiographic metafiction, such as Umberto Eco's "The Name of the Rose," John Gardner's "The Sunlight Dialogues," and Christa Wolf's "Cassandra." (MM)

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THE PROBLEMATICS OF POSTMODERNISM:

THE DOUBLE-VOICED HONORS CANON

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THE DOUBLE-VOICED HONORS CANON

Tim McGeachen

National Honors Newsletter Summer, 1989

"But I have determined to tell, of those remote events, the whole truth, and truth is indivisible, it shines with its own transparency and does not allow itself to be diminished by our interests or our shame." (243) Adso

"Perhaps the mission of those who love mankind is to make poeple laugh at the truth, to make truth laugh, because the only truth lies in learning to free ourselves from the insane passion for the truth." (491) William of Baskerville

These two quotations are from Umberto Eco's novel The Name of the Rose and they bespeak the current controversy that surrounds higher education. What is our essential mission? To center the canon as the transparent truth, whole and complete? Or to make the canon "ex-centic" and thus present modes of knowing which free the learner to make his or her own truth?

Honors education is not immune from this problem. Indeed, the problem seems especially crucial for Honors Programs, for their curriculums are often multi-disciplinary in their approaches to culture and history. The situation for Honors is very ably spelled out in Janice Harris and David Duvall's "Of Canons and Paradigms: What Good are They?" (The National Honors Report, Summer 1988, Vol. IX No.2 pp.21-23). Harris and Duvall voice what are major concerns for curricular revisions in Honors. As with the

debate that rages nationally (and within the pages of The Name of the Rose), Harris and Duvall work in bifurcations: diversity/consensus; humanities/sciences; canons/relevancy; paradigms/change. Harris and Duvall privilege the question exactly: how can we welcome new voices and yet be sure the old ones have been heard?

Yet for all of their understanding of the problem, Harris and Duvall's conclusion is ultimately unsatisfactory. The solution to to our bifurcations, they suggest, "is probably some Aristotelian mean: enough of a core/canon/ paradigm to be efficient and let readers read competently and thinker speak to thinker, enough flexibility to welcome new ideas and voices."

The either/or split of the dispute will need something newer than Harris and Duvall's modernist-sounding "mean" which may synthesize opposites. Perhaps, our solution lies more in the area of what Linda Hutcheon calls the "poetics of the postmodern." [A Poetics of Postmodernism (New York: Routledge, 1988)] For Hutcheon, an essential strategy of the postmodern is that of the "double voicing" found in language itself. Our bifurcated sense of the world comes directly from language: "Language paradoxically both expresses and oppresses, educates and manipulates." (199) This quotation is indicative of the importance her double strategy of installing and questioning, of enunciating and contextualizing that she posits as the central oxymoron of postmodern understanding: the privileging of inclusivity.

Her subtitle, "History, Theory, Fiction" is an example

of the ironic double voicing in her own reflexive discourse: she explains both the history, theory, and fiction of and within the postmodern. Although she talks preciously little about the classroom (one paragraph on pages 185-6), Hutcheon's thesis is of fundamental importance for any curriculum which has cultural history as its central point of study.

I think we can use this double-voiced strategy to our own purposes when discussing curriculum revision. This can be done by both installing the canon and then using special texts which in turn question the canon, making that canon, in Hutcheon's phrase, "ex-centric." Hutcheon calls these texts by the nearly impossible to pronounce title "historiographic metafiction." Sure, the phrase sounds daunting, but her description is indicative of possible solutions to the canon, paradigm, literacy problem raised by Harris and Duvall.

For Hutcheon, historiographic metafiction incorporates the literature, history and theory of the postmodern domain: "its theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs (historiographic metafiction) is made the grounds for its rethinking and reworking of the forms and contents of the past."(5) Through historiographic meta-fiction all the assumed grounds of our understanding are questioned. The radical subject (as separate from social constructions), privileged view-point (usually white, western, and male), and neat, orderly, inevitable history (as opposed to multivalent histories) are concepts that are

simultaneously installed and questioned.

What she is not talking about, however, is historical fiction which attempts to recreate a "faithful" view of how "things really were." Rather "What the postmodern writing of both history and literature has taught us that both history and literature are discourses, that both constitute systems of signification by which we make sense of the past...In other words, the meaning and shape are not in the events, but in the systems which make those past 'events' into present historical 'facts.'"(89) Unlike historical fiction, historiographic metafiction foregrounds the constructive and reconstructive acts of historisizing and assumes no "natural" viewpoint or "given" order to history outside of those making and making sense of history.

Take, for example, a deliberate postmodern work like The Name of the Rose. It is simultaneously a work of fiction and an explanation of the complexities of the medieval mind. As a postmodern work, its very position is ironic, for the postmodern does not destroy the past, as the modern often attempts to do, but revisits it, as Eco states, "without innocence." For we know whenever we use language in whatever kind of discourse we choose, we educate and manipulate. With its mystery story plot and its multiple intertextual references to art, language, religion, and philosophy, Name is an accessible (give it a hundred pages) postmodern reconstruction and questioning of what we call the medieval.

To accomplish our double-voiced, ex-centric Honors curriculum, I propose a three semester sequence based on the tripartite division of history into the admittedly oversimplified categories of Premodern, Modern, and Postmodern. Space forbids me from listing complete syllabi. But assuming three semesters, one for the Premodern, the next for the Modern, and a third for the Postmodern, I will present the barest of outlines.

The first two semesters are devoted to the installation of the canon. We cannot nor do we want to abandon what individual curriculums consider the classics of its culture. The one listed below is the one we have used and is, I think, fairly typical of the Great Books, Great Ideas approach. The third semester, however, is devoted to the questioning of that approach by using historiographic metafictions.

The historiographic metafictions below are those with intertextual references to either specific classical works, historical figures, movements, time frames, or issues. Some like Ishmael Reed's The Terrible Twos make multiple references. Reed, for example, refers to Dante's Inferno, Dickens' A Christmas Carol, and late twentieth century American culture (which he describes as "an id on a tricycle."). Others deal with an absence in the classical canon, as Christa Wolf attempts to do in Cassandra which bespeaks a woman's voice within the Trojan war. There is,

however, a third category, The Presences of Absences, at the end of the third semester. They challenge no canon for they challenge the very notions of of canon making. These are the now rising voices which speak of those voices usually excluded from the classroom. As with the entire syllabus, this list is suggestive, not exhaustive.

THE DOUBLE-VOICED HONORS CANON

PREMODERN	POSTMODERN:HISTORIOGRAPHIC METAFICTION
(First Semester)	(Third Semester)
Gilgamesh	John Gardner, The Sunlight Dialogues
Homer, The Iliad or The Odyssey	Christa Wolf, Cassandra
Dante, The Divine Comedy (Or the Medieval)	Umberto Eco, The Name of Rose Ishmael Reed, The Terrible Twos
MODERN (Second Semester)	
The Scientific Revolution	John Banville, Kepler " " Dr.Copernicus " " The Newton Letter
The French Revolution	Susan Daitch, L.C.

Dickens, A Christmas Carol

Freud and Jung

Virginia Woolf, To the Lighthouse

T.S.Eliot, The Four Quartets

Reed, The Terrible Twos

D.M.Thomas, The White Hotel

Audrey Thomas, Intertidal Life

John Ashbery, Litany

THE PRESENCES OF ABSENCES

Thomas Berger, Little Big Man (American Indians)

Gabriel Garcia Marquez, One Hundred Years of Solitude (South American History)

Margaret Atwood, The Handmaiden's Tale (Feminist Historisizing)

Toni Morrison, Song of Solomon (Black Historisizing)

Salam Rushdie, Mid-night's Children (Non-Western Historisizing)

There are many other possible texts and approaches. The potential value of this approach is that it allows for both the installing of the canon in traditional ways, yet it also foregrounds those texts which give another perspective on our histories. And since the texts are fiction they are, at least theoretically, accessible to the readers who inhabit the difficult whole that is the postmodern campus.

The last chapter of Hutcheon's book is "Conclusion: A Poetics or a Problematics?" Hutcheon rightfully asserts that the issues raised by postmodernism are nothing knew, but the discourses they contain present us with "issues that were not particularly problematic before but now certainly are: ...the boundaries between the literary and the traditional extra-literary, between fiction and non-fiction, and, ultimately, between art and life." These raise serious questions for us: "do we know the difference? Can we know the difference" between these once discrete fields? "How can we know the past today?" (225) are questions which echo and reecho in every classroom.

As Eco and Hutcheon make clear these questions are nothing new. Yet as Harris and Duvall make equally clear, we must continually reframe the possible solutions, no matter how provisional. I will be experimenting with above in hopes of getting some understanding of the problematics of the postmodern. And professors Harris and Duvall are to be praised for their courageous look at the questions.